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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000626

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SUBJECT: THE BATTLE FOR CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF VENEZUELA

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Classified By: Public Affairs Counselor Benjamin Ziff,
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Chavistas and the opposition are competing for control over the public Central University of Venezuela (UCV) in the May 9 administrative elections. The winners will head the university for the next four years and, given the prominence and prestige of the UCV, will influence higher education more widely in Venezuela. These elections are a high-profile test of the BRV's efforts to extend President Chavez' "Bolivarian Revolution" to college campuses, particularly in Venezuela's elite autonomous universities. Despite the BRV's best efforts, two centrists are widely considered the leading candidates. End Summary.

UCV Elections

¶2. (SBU) The public Central University of Venezuela (UCV) is the crown jewel of Venezuela's public university system with a student population of over 50,000 drawn from all social strata. Once again viewing the university administration elections process as a means to take control of a key institution, the BRV is reportedly backing a self-identified Bolivarian candidate and trying to marshal support with the minority of pro-government UCV students. There are currently seven autonomous universities in Venezuela; long bastions of opposition to the Bolivarian Revolution, these institutions are constitutionally protected from government interference despite receiving government funding. Autonomy is in the Constitution of 1999, but President Chavez attempted to remove the provision in the failed 2007 constitutional reforms.

¶3. (SBU) The UCV elections will decide the top administrative positions at the university: Rector, Vice Rectors for Administration and Academics, and Secretary. These four office-holders will chart the future of the university for at least four years, and possibly eight if re-elected. The elections take place in two phases: an initial balloting May 9 and a run-off between the top two contenders on the 16th. Because of UCV's importance and influence, the results of this election may influence the course of higher education throughout Venezuela for years to come.

¶4. (SBU) Last year's election at the similarly autonomous public Universidad de los Andes (ULA), located in Merida, ended in a bitter defeat for the Bolivarians. Opposition contacts tell us they suspect that President Chavez, working through the Ministry of Higher Education, is using these elections as a backdoor to change the character of the UCV.

They are also fearful that pro-government thugs may try to disrupt the electoral process rather than allow an opposition-oriented slate of candidates to win.

The Candidates

¶5. (SBU) According to Embassy contacts, the four candidates for Rector include one from the right, one from the left, and two from the center. The right-leaning candidate, Eleazar Narvaez, whose platform emphasizes the sanctity of UCV's autonomy, is the current Vice-Rector for Academics. His ideological antithesis is Dean of the Communications School, Lenin Molina, who, as the BRV candidate, advocates massive reform in the administration and acceptance policies to better reflect the socio-economic makeup of modern-day Venezuela which would, in effect, lower academic standards.

¶6. (SBU) Two centrists, however, are the leading candidates: the current Secretary, Cecelia Garcia Arocha, and Law School Dean, Jorge Pabon. Arocha sees autonomy as a central tenet of the university but also calls for simplification of the academic and administrative processes of UCV. Pabon also supports autonomy, but at the same time stresses that the government-funded University should attempt to improve relations with the Chavez Regime. Current Rector Antonio Paris, finishing his second term in office, is throwing his considerable political support behind Pabon, improving the latter's electoral prospects.

¶7. (C) Comment. Academic politics increasingly reflect the polarization of Venezuelan society, all the more so given BRV's efforts to assert more ideological control over school curriculum and diminish university autonomy. While the

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Venezuelan government has yet to confront the public university system head on, it has attacked their budgets, admission examinations, and unions in an attempt to gain a foothold. UCV administration elections are another front-line in that struggle. Since the BRV lacks significant support among UCV faculty and students, electoral victory appears unlikely. Arocha and Pabon are likely to face each other in the May 16 run-off, and the victor will struggle with the BRV to maintain the UCV's academic autonomy, the right to uphold its demanding acceptance standards, and its reputation as the best public university in Venezuela. End Comment.
DUDDY